LIFE'S SECOND QUESTION

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

The great philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that there are three questions in life:

> "What can we know?
>
> What must we do?
>
> What can we hope for?"

I'm not sure he had Immanuel Kant in mind, but one of the very distinguished Biblical scholars and teachers of our time, Walter Wink, put it ever more powerfully. Wink says:

> "The fundamental question for the first half of our pilgrimage is 'what is the meaning of my life?' The question for the second half is, 'With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?'"

Life's second question -

> "What must we do?
>
> "With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?"

Sometimes life puts that question to us urgently. The late Arthur Ashe was a world champion tennis player, captain of America's Davis Cup Team, who in the course of heart surgery, contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. As he was dying he wrote a wonderful book, Days of Grace.

After his first by-pass surgery and the decision to retire from playing tennis in 1979, Ashe experienced a sense of uneasiness, restlessness. He reflects:

> "How could I be dissatisfied, even subtly, with my life to that point? I had lived a fantasy of a life. But I was dissatisfied. Who knows what force gnaws at us, telling us that our accomplishments, no matter how sensational, are not enough, that we need to do more?" [p. 39]

> "I wanted to make a difference, however small in the world." [p. 43]

Life's second question. Immanuel Kant, speaking out of the dim past, and Walter Wink from a modern classroom, and Arthur Ashe, in the middle of an unplanned, unexpected collision with his own mortality: they all sound like a young man who one day came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He'd obviously been thinking about it a lot, too.

He's a very attractive young person. Jesus looked at this young man and loved him. He was so earnest, so sincere, so hard working, so purposeful, so successful.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Life's second big question. ... There's something gnawing at this young person, and who doesn't know what it feels like? She's got it all: great job, good friends, lots of travel, promising future and a growing portfolio with her broker. . . but there is this gnawing dis-ease. . . this middle of the night dissatisfaction. What more must I do?

Jesus doesn't condemn or criticize the young man. He appreciates him. When he tells the young man to follow the religious rules, to keep on keeping on, and the young man assures him that he's already doing all that, Jesus prescribes: tells him something further to do. . . and it's stunning.

> "Sell your possessions - give the money to the poor. Come - follow me."

One scholar, commenting on the text, said that if you aren't appalled by this message, you have not yet heard it.

The young man, Matthew explains, went away grieving because he has many possessions. He was appalled. I can understand that. I'm appalled too. Who isn't? Sell everything? Give it all away?

You and I live in a culture that promises us, and our children, that you can buy life. You can establish happiness and security if you earn enough, have enough, accumulate enough. We live in a "consumer culture."

The trouble is consumer culture doesn't deliver on its promises to provide happiness, and, in fact, works to the detriment of institutions which can - family, schools, non-profit public organizations and churches, mosques, synagogues. Cornell West whose fine new book, Race Matters, looks evenly and intelligently at the malaise of racism, poverty, unemployment and escalating violence in which we find ourselves, and in a recent

interview said that when a market economy - which we now know is in some way necessary - becomes a market culture - mediating institutions that hold us together start to deteriorate. And why not? Why wouldn't family, school and church deteriorate if the philosophic, spiritual drive behind the culture is greed, selfishness, narcissism?

Jesus did not condemn this young man. He had a wonderful opportunity to launch a diatribe against success and its rewards but he didn't. He did not condemn his wealth. He loved this young man.

What's wrong with him? Well, he's not free, for starters. He was already in bondage. His inability to sell all means that what he had - owned him. I'll bet he was too busy to enjoy life. I'll bet he worked so hard to get ahead, he couldn't remember what "ahead" meant. I'll bet the task of securing what he had, scurrying to keep up with inflation, was so important that he had no time, no love, no passion in life.

I think that's why he came to Jesus. He was engaged in a struggle for his own soul. And for him the prescription was surgical: let it go - give it away - and come follow me.

The most reassuring part of the story is that the disciples themselves were amazed and asked, "Then who can be saved?" They weren't wealthy obviously. They had given up about as much as it is possible to give and yet they knew that they still loved what they had.

Arthur Ashe wrote,

> "I'm glad I have enough money to live comfortably. I decided long ago that, on the whole, I much prefer having money to not having it. On the other hand, I also learned a long time ago what money can and cannot do for me. From what we get we make a living. What we give, however, makes a life." [p. 176]

I found Arthur Ashe's memoir touching because he experienced and wrote about, in a compressed period of months, the human condition. Most of us, thank God, don't have that necessity. And yet, we are not here forever. We have only so many chances to make a difference.

When Arthur Ashe made public announcement of his condition, he became angry, depressed; and then, after three weeks his anger began to subside and the idea of AIDS and what it meant about the future began to integrate.

He wrote:

> "You come to the realization that time is short. These are extraordinary conditions. You have to step up. How much time I had left, I did not know. However, I could not ignore the fact that AIDS, as well as heart disease, was exacting a heavy toll on my body. I had no time to waste."

So he began to speak out on the topic of AIDS: how you get it, how to keep from getting it - and how urgent it is for all of us to understand the terrifying prospect of this epidemic continuing unabated.

He opened his heart and his resources and established a Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS, and an association for African American Athletes, and an Institute for Urban Health at the State University of New York, and a chair in Pediatric AIDS Research at St. Jude's Hospital, Memphis; he became more vocal and active politically, protesting U.S. policy on Haitian refugees and getting arrested at the White House.

And he wrote:

> "As I settled into this new stage of my life I became increasingly conscious of. . . an exhilaration. I felt pain, but also something like pleasure in responding purposefully, vigorously. I had lost many matches on the tennis court, but I had seldom quit. I was losing, but playing well now: my head was down, my eyes riveted on the ball, I had to be careful but I could not be tentative." [p. 251]

And it seemed to me, reading this graceful book and thinking about what it means to be alive and well, with an opportunity to make a difference, it seemed to me that Arthur Ashe had in fact, discovered his answer to life's second question and that you and I might pay careful attention.

At the end of the book, not very long before he died, he wrote,

> "I am a fortunate man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems." [p. 292]

There are opportunities every day to make a difference. How said to miss them.

It is our deepest trust that our ultimate destiny is in the gracious hands of a loving God.

Life. . . your capacity to make a difference, to love and work and care. . . to participate in and to empower, and to support institutions that bring healing and hope to others - your fulfillment and purpose and even your happiness, all of that is in your hands.

Life's second question. . . What must I do?

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